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PROGRAM All Things Considered

STATION WETA Radio
NPR Network

DATE August 10, 1984 5:00 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Precautions Against Terrorism at Olympics

SUSAN STAMBERG: Terrorism has been an ongoing concern at the Los Angeles Summer Olympics and a cause for elaborate precautions. The L.A. Police Department, the FBI, the Secret Service, other agencies have set up an unprecedented security net around the athletes. So far, there's been only one incident that raised any alarm about terrorist activity. That was the denial of visas for three men who applied to cover the games as Libyan journalists.

NPR's Catherine Ferguson reports on that story.

CATHERINE FERGUSON: Not much is known about the case of the three men who applied for entry as Libyan journalists. Neither Olympics officials nor U.S. Government officials will say if they were actually credentialed as reporters before the U.S. denied their visa applications. But a Washington lawyer representing Libya says the three men had been approved for journalist credentials before their visa denial. According to this lawyer, they were to be reporting to the Libyan state news agency Jana (?).

U.S. officials will not say why their visas were denied. The only explanation given was that the denial was based on internal security reasons.

But Rafi Gerber (?), an Israeli citizen living in Los Angeles, believes U.S. authorities had reason to be concerned about the Libyan delegation to the Olympics. Gerber works for an organization called the Jerusalem Research Team. He describes it as more or less a research company which monitors, in his words, political movements around the Free World using terrorism as their modus operandi.

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Approved For Release 2008/09/19 : CIA-RDP88-01070R000201330005-6

Gerber says he was investigating the delegations from different Arab countries coming to the Olympics when:

RAFI GERBER: It came to my attention, through different sources, reliable sources, that the Libyans are going to have a certain amount of Palestinians in their delegation. The Palestinians were members of the PLO that left Beirut after the war. The reason for them to participate with the Libyans in Los Angeles was to let them have a chance to raise the Palestinian flag during the opening ceremonies.

FERGUSON: Gerber says he informed the FBI and the Olympic Security Committee of his information of the PLO connection in the Libyan delegation and of the alleged plans for raising the Palestinian flag during opening ceremonies.

U.S. officials won't confirm that they spoke with Gerber, nor will they say that this information is connected to the subsequent visa denial.

Gerber says he learned of the PLO connection several weeks before the public announcement that the U.S. had rejected the visa applications for the alleged Libyan journalists. At the time the visa denials were made known, Gerber says, he wasn't sure the three men in question were connected with the planned PLO demonstration at the opening ceremony. Now, says Gerber, he believes two of the three were to be involved.

While one official source steered NPR away from the alleged flag demonstration as the cause for U.S. security concern, the source indicated that the basis for the denial was close ties of a membership sort with the Palestine Liberation Organization. And quite apart from any information supplied by Rafi Gerber or any other non-official source, close ties to the PLO can be and often is enough for the U.S. Government to deny a visa, under any circumstance, Olympics or no Olympics.

Intelligence sources are said to have provided the information on which the three visas were denied. And to understand the scope of intelligence sources at the disposal of the U.S. Government, the normal visa application process when a security problem is called into question is quite revealing.

Let's say for the sake of argument that three individuals claiming to be Libyans apply for a U.S. visa at the consular offices of the American Embassy in Paris. The U.S. has no diplomatic ties with Libya, so there is no embassy there at which to apply for a visa. According to State Department sources, the application of any Libyan would put a consular officer on alert. Libya is on the U.S. terrorist list. It is one of a number of countries which the Administration has accused

of sponsoring state-supported terrorism.

So, in a case like this, the consular officer would cable Washington for what's called an advisory opinion, asking for instructions on how to handle the case. The Washington consular office would most probably check its files for background information, request information from other State Department bureaus and foreign posts, and, depending on what turns up, an all-agency check might be requested. Usually that means the FBI and the CIA, both of which keep lists of known or suspected terrorists.

Another avenue open to the State Department is the National Security Agency, that most secretive of all U.S. intelligence-gathering agencies. It is charged with monitoring worldwide communications, phone calls, telegrams and telexes.

James Bamford is author of The Puzzle Palace, which details the operations of the National Security Agency. Bamford says the NSA keeps its own terrorist watch list.

JAMES BAMFORD: They try to enter much more than just the name. They try to enter any information that might kick out one of the terrorist communications, such as nicknames, where they live, who they would normally communicate to, those type of things. So, then, whenever one of those indicators gets triggered, it records the conversation or monitors the telegram, whatever. So they try to keep track of a great deal.

FERGUSON: And NSA shares information with the FBI and CIA, and it trades watch-list information with the electronic surveillance agencies of a number of other governments.

So, says Bamford:

BAMFORD: If the United States can't pick up the information from one of its listening posts, then maybe Great Britain can pick it up from a listening post that they have on Cyprus, for example. One way or the other, the information would almost certainly be picked up.

FERGUSON: What kind of information? Let's go back to the PLO. Under U.S. immigration laws, association or affiliation with the PLO is sufficient for a visa denial. In determining this association, according to one well-placed source, attendance at PLO executive committee meetings would qualify an individual, or even allegations made by a person's relatives that he or she had close ties with the PLO could do it.

The Attorney General can grant a waiver, as in the case of PLO officials who hold official observer status at the United

Nations, but only if, in the parlance of the U.S. Government, only if they are clean -- that is to say, if they have no ties with terrorist activities.

It was information collected by one or another U.S. intelligence agency which led to rejecting the visas of the three men who applied as Libyan journalists. According to one source, their names rang a bell on some watch list.

Most of the people we contacted were unwilling to speak out publicly about the case of the three so-called Libyan journalists, except for Rafi Gerber of the Jerusalem Research Team. Gerber says two of the three are, quote, without a shadow of a doubt Palestinians who were forced to leave Beirut following Israel's invasion of Lebanon two years ago. The third, says Gerber, is a Libyan whose name came up on an FBI watch list. But as far as having connections with an Olympics terrorist plot, Rafi Gerber says he never found any evidence of that.

GERBER: They wanted to raise a Palestinian flag during the opening more than anything else in order to show the world that they are still on the map. Beyond that, no. I haven't had any indication that they were trying to do anything else beside that. We checked into it. We were asking and we were looking into it. We had no indication whatsoever that they tried to go beyond that.

FERGUSON: The Jerusalem Research Team is said to employ former Israeli military, intelligence and security officers. Gerber says he fits into that general category, but he won't be any more specific about his past employment.

STAMBERG: Just a quick question. You said that it's thought that two of the three people applying for visas were Palestinians, but that the third was Libyan. Does that mean, then, that there is also a Libyan watch list?

FERGUSON: Susan, I don't know that there's a separate Libyan watch list. But as I mentioned earlier, the U.S. has put the country of Libya on its terrorist list. The recent siege at Libya's People's Bureau in London has underlined concern for what goes on under the protection of diplomatic immunity. Several years ago the Reagan Administration was concerned that Libyan death squads had been dispatched to possibly assassinate U.S. Government officials. And there have been cases, the U.S. included, where it's believed that Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Qaddafi has sent agents to harass dissident Libyans. And there are literally thousands of Libyan students in this country.

And then, finally -- and I add this as a last footnote -- no U.S. Government official ever mentioned this in connection

with the case of the three Libyan journalists. But among non-government terrorist experts I spoke with, it is widely held that Qaddafi supported the terrorists who seized Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games at Munich. And by support, Susan, I specifically mean supplying training and money.

STAMBERG: Thanks very much, NPR's Catherine Ferguson.